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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000376

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL KURDS FOCUS ON IRAQI "KURDISTAN"

REF: A) 03 ANKARA 6163 AND 4315 B) 03 ANKARA 4499

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b & d)

11. (C) Summary: Previously polarized and defined by their degree of support and sympathy for the PKK (later KADEK, now KONGRA-GEL) and imprisoned former PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Istanbul Kurds tells us they have increasingly adopted Iraqi Kurds and their experiment with autonomy as their new cause celebre. The ongoing efforts by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) to secure a high degree of autonomy within a federal Iraq enjoy widespread support among Kurds in Istanbul. This shift appears to have undermined some support in Istanbul for the PKK and for those who have traditionally adopted anti-U.S. positions (Embassy Note: We have not seen a similar shift among Kurds in Ankara or the Southeast. End Note). Our Istanbul Kurdish contacts remain concerned, however, about the plight of their "children in the mountains" and disparage the Turkish government's inadequate PKK-related Reintegration Law and its overall policy on the Kurdish issue. Pessimistic about the ongoing EU reform process and short-term prospects for a positive shift in government policy, moderate Kurds in Istanbul hope that when Ankara sees that an official Kurdish entity (as part of a federal Iraq) represents no threat to its interests, the Turkish Government and State will eventually be more forthcoming in response to local demands for Kurdish cultural rights. End Summary.

Istanbul: The Largest Kurdish City in the World

12. (C) With up to 2 million Kurds, Istanbul is, by most accounts, the largest Kurdish city in the world. While many Kurds here and in other large Turkish cities enjoy more economic opportunities and a less oppressive political climate than Kurds in the Southeast, most of our contacts still say that "in their hearts" they aspire to an independent Kurdish state. Few would ever choose to leave western Turkey, however, to return to an independent Southeast. One Kurdish lawyer from Diyarbakir said, moreover, that if many in the Southeast were forced to choose between being able to hop on a bus to Istanbul and being confined to an "independent Kurdistan," they too would reconsider their separatist aspirations. Educated Kurds we have talked to are generally realistic and admit that they would be satisfied with true protection of their cultural and human rights, something to which they are convinced, however, that Ankara remains uncommitted.

"Winning the Peace": Kurdish Cultural Rights

13. (C) The widespread view of Kurds in Istanbul is that the Turkish State distrusts the Kurds and systematically discriminates against them (ref A reports on similar views among Kurds in the Southeast). They argue that the State and successive governments have never paid more than lip service to protecting Kurdish cultural rights. Our Kurdish contacts see the recent reforms to allow Kurdish language instruction and broadcasting as the bare minimum required for Turkey's EU membership. Moreover, they note that there has been little progress in implementing even these insufficient reforms. Sefik Beyaz, Chairman of the Istanbul Kurdish Institute (an organization that seeks to bring together disparate Kurdish groups to promote Kurdish culture) and also a left-wing alliance mayoral candidate for his home town Bitlis in Eastern Turkey, told poloff that implementation of these reforms is not "sincere" and that there have been no "real steps" taken. On the importance of the language issue, however, Beyaz added that "if you accept only one language (i.e., Turkish), you are condemning Kurdish and Kurdish culture to death." (Note: Despite recent reforms, no Kurdish language schools have begun classes to date, although this is expected to happen soon. There are also no Kurdish-language broadcasts as yet under these reforms. End Note).

14. (C) ConGen's Kurdish contacts believe that neither the ruling AKP nor the opposition CHP have demonstrated a

forward-leaning position or any creative thinking on the Kurdish issue. Kemal Parlak, a former Istanbul Chairman of the Kurdish political party DEP, said that "Kurdish Kurds" were largely kept off the November 2002 party lists by both AKP and CHP. Mustafa Ayzit, a prominent Kurdish lawyer and occasional human rights advocate, acknowledged current Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu's Kurdish origins, but pointed to his previous work as a police chief and governor in dismissing him as a "product of the state." (Note: Aksu's son Murat confessed to poloff separately that the family never spoke Kurdish at home. End note.) This political disenfranchisement has contributed to a stifling of the public debate among the Kurdish community in Istanbul. Moderate Kurds who engage in political activity are routinely harassed, arrested, and often brought to trial by the state on little more than suspicion of affiliation with the PKK. Ironically, these same people are castigated and discredited within the Kurdish community by leftist, radical PKK sympathizers for their moderate policies. As a result, there is a dearth of moderate leaders and an exchange of ideas within the Kurdish community.

The PKK and Ocalan: Previously the Only Game in Town

15. (C) Until now debate among our Kurdish contacts in Istanbul has focused on the PKK and its now-imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan. Istanbul reps of successive Kurdish political parties, including DEP, HEP, HADEP, and now DEHAP, are openly sympathetic to the PKK's separatist agenda and are widely believed to have informal links with the PKK itself. Other Kurdish organizations based in Istanbul, despite official harassment and legal challenges, have generally maintained their distance from the PKK, but remain battlegrounds for Kurdish intellectuals arguing over the extent to which they should show sympathy to a separatist agenda. Hasan Kaya, the former chairman of the Kurdish Institute, told us last year that he resigned under pressure from more extremist members for his criticism of the Kurdish party DEHAP/HADEP and for not pursuing a more pro-PKK agenda. DEMOS, a group of Istanbul Kurdish intellectuals that first came together in 1998 to seek a solution to the "Kurdish issue," has been criticized and torn apart by debate on the same issue. "Ninety-five percent of Kurds do not agree with the PKK (and its methods), but many feel compelled to support (it) to a certain degree," Kaya claimed. The PKK's lack of hard-core support, Kaya continued, is immediately obvious when one examines the public turnout for pro-Ocalan rallies (usually no more than a few thousand) and the annual Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations (as many as 500,000). That being said, "even I don't want to be characterized as anti-PKK," Kaya confessed.

A New Cause Celebre: Iraqi Kurdistan

16. (C) According to Kaya, Ayzit, Parlak and others, the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq has now completely changed the debate within the Kurdish community. Although our contacts say that cultural and linguistic differences continue to separate them from Kurds in Iraq, they see Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for an ethnic federation as a proxy for their own unrealized ambitions. The tantalizing prospect of a permanent, legal Kurdish autonomous entity (albeit within an Iraqi federation) has proved to be an inspiration and unifying cause for Turkish Kurds, our contacts assert. Many of our contacts in Istanbul now also feel more comfortable in challenging the PKK's rhetoric. Kemal Parlak indicated, for example, that he and others had disagreed with the PKK and HADEP when they labeled the PUK and KDP as "collaborators and traitors." Still others told us that the new focus on Iraq has undermined support in the Kurdish community for the PKK and for those adopting anti-U.S. positions. Rusen Cakir, a columnist for Vatan newspaper and an expert on the Kurdish issue, told poloff that while support for the PKK among Turkish Kurds has decreased, Kurdish nationalism, including a sub-current of separatism, appears to be on the rise.

17. (C) This sympathy for Iraqi Kurds underlies the logic that our contacts assert led most Istanbul Kurds to support the U.S.-led intervention (although most Turks did not), but to oppose a parliamentary measure that would have allowed Turkey to deploy troops to northern Iraq. (Embassy Note: Embassy Kurdish contacts in Ankara and the Southeast asserted that Kurds in the Southeast opposed the invasion, if only out of fear of a Turkish crackdown in the Southeast and Northern Iraq. After the Iraqi regime was routed, without a Turkish military incursion and with Kurdish support, they began to tell us it had been a good thing after all. End Note). Istanbul Kurds also split with their fellow Turkish citizens upon hearing reports of ethnic clashes between Iraqi Kurds and Turkmen in Kirkuk. Many Istanbul Kurds were upset that Turkey appears to be cooperating with Syria and Iran to oppose Kurdish demands in Iraq and are now worried about reports that the U.S. may pressure the Kurds to back down as

well. More than one Kurdish contact has remarked to us that "nobody" seems to question Palestinian demands for an independent state or Turkish Cypriot demands for an "ethnically-divided confederation," but that Kurdish aspirations are always seen as overreaching.

"Our Fates Are Intertwined"

18. (C) Looking forward, our contacts are nervous that Kurdish aspirations may once again be frustrated, but are also cautiously optimistic that developments in Northern Iraq could have a positive impact on their situation in Turkey. The "positive scenario" that our contacts have laid out envisions Turkey at peace with a "Kurdish neighbor" within a federal Iraq. Our contacts say that when Turkey's worst fears about Kurdish separatism go unrealized, they hope that the Turkish state will change its fundamental approach towards its own Kurdish population. The "negative scenario" centers on a clash between Iraqi Kurdish demands for autonomy and/or Kirkuk and Turkey's opposition. The ethnic conflict that may ensue if the Iraqi Kurds feel that they are being forgotten "once again" will exacerbate tensions among the Istanbul Kurdish community and harden Turkey's stance on the Kurdish issue.

19. (C) Most Istanbul Kurds we have spoken with believe that the U.S. will play the determining role as this drama unfolds. "We have cast our lot with (the U.S.)," Mustafa Ayzit explained. Our contacts are less specific, however, when it comes to the details of the Kurdish demands for autonomy in northern Iraq. Kirkuk appears to be a powerful symbol of Kurdish identity, but most stopped short of insisting that its inclusion in a Kurdish region was a sine qua non (one mentioned interim international administration of the city as a possible compromise). The unresolved issue of PKK militants in Iraq is also a major concern. While many we spoke to harbor little sympathy for the PKK leadership, most feel that any military action against their "children in the mountains" (i.e., the rank and file) would prompt widespread outrage and condemnation among the Kurdish community here. Despite the failure of last year's Reintegration Law (ref B), all of our Kurdish contacts expressed the firm belief that a "genuine" amnesty would solve the problem.

110. (C) Comment: Most Kurdish contacts in Istanbul credit the U.S. with giving Iraqi Kurds an opportunity to achieve long-standing aspirations for cultural identity. Our contacts believe that the outcome of the ongoing developments in Iraq will be more significant for their own future in Turkey than any ongoing domestic reforms or even Turkey's EU membership process.

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